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PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST AND THE PROTECTION OF MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 June 1999]

GE.99-13902 (E)

1. The Society for Threatened Peoples warns against endangering the diversity of languages and cultures in the European Union (EU). According to the "euromosaic" study published in 1996 by the European Commission, of the 48 minority languages in the EU territory 23 have only "limited" or "no" capability of survival. Twelve other minority languages are considered as "endangered". 1/ Unfortunately, the EU has hardly drawn any consequences from this study. Of its total budget of 90 trillion Euro, only 2.5 million Euro are available to the organizations of linguistic minorities. This is not enough by far to allow efficient work. Particularly little support is given to those languages which, in their respective countries, are not recognized as official languages.

2. Forty million citizens of the EU do not speak an acknowledged official language, up to now they have been disregarded as a constituting element of the EU. The members of the small European nationalities and minorities without a State who do not speak one of the official languages of the EU as their native language are marginalized. Their hopes of an acknowledgement of their languages and cultures have not been fulfilled by the EU Governments.

3. Some EU member States are following a definitely anti-minority policy. Greece, for example, denies the existence of ethnic minorities like Slavo-Macedonians, Aromanians and Albanians. The Greek authorities discriminate against Muslim minorities - the Turk and Bulgarian speaking Pomaks in West Thrace. Until now, all Greek Governments have rejected the European initiatives for the protection of minorities. Greece is the only EU member State which did not allow the European Office for Minority Languages to form a section in Greece.

4. France denies elementary linguistic and cultural rights to at least 4.5 million members of the Basque, Breton, Alsatian German, Catalan, Corse, Dutch and Provencal minorities. The use of the minority languages violates article 2 of the French Constitution, which establishes French as the only official language. A change in the French minority policy seems likely now. France has signed the Language Charter and thus acknowledges for the first time in principle the altochtone multi-linguality of the country. Following signature of the Charter of Regional and Minority Languages of the Council of Europe, the Society for Threatened Peoples International appeals to the French Parliament to ratify the Charter as quickly as possible.

5. In Italy, only the German and Ladin speaking South Tyrolians, the Slovenians and the Franco-Aostans are protected as minorities. Most minorities, however - Albanians and Greeks in South Italy, Croats in Molise, Provencals, Friulians and Sardinians, Cimbrians and German and Slovenic speakers in Friaul and Carnia, as well as the Ladins in Belluno province - have been waiting for more than 50 years for the realization of the protection of minorities as provided for by article 6 of the Constitution. Although the Chamber of Delegates of the Italian Parliament approved the corresponding law a year ago, the Constitutional Committee of the Senate followed suit only on 3 June 1999 and passed the law. It should be passed by the Senate before the summer break. Fifty years after the adoption of the Constitution, article 6 will be put into practice with a corresponding law. The discrimination against the languages of the minorities has led, according to "euromosaic", to the fact that 6 of the 13 linguistic minorities of Italy have hardly a chance of survival.

6. In Austria, article VII of the State treaty providing for the protection and support of minorities (Slovenians in Kärnten, Hungarians and Croats in the Burgenland) has not yet been fully implemented. Complaints range from the lack of bilingual nursery schools, schools and place names to the lack of recognition of the minority language as an official language. Jörg Haider, head of the Kärnten state government, has stopped the appointment of directors for bilingual schools. He opposes the practice of preferring bilingual experts. Organizations of Slovenian language groups consider Haider's action as a massive attack on bilingual education. Various human rights organizations have called the attitude of the Government of Austria with regard to its linguistic minorities discriminatory.

7. Thus several EU member States act against the content and intention of the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties. Both treaties, as well as several decisions of the European Parliament, underline cultural and linguistic diversity, demand respect of national and regional differences and oblige the EU to promote different cultures. Furthermore, not allowing minority languages to be used in offices, schools and the media violates several United Nations recommendations (on discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities).

8. In its 1993 "Declaration of Vienna", the Council of Europe requested the creation of a "climate of tolerance and dialogue", so that all citizens of Europe - including members of minorities - can participate in political life. As a consequence of the "Declaration of Vienna", the Council of Europe passed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. The Charter as well as the Framework Convention have been ratified by a sufficient number of States to enter into force. The fact remains that neither of these documents has been transformed into national law by the ratifying countries. These States have not yet created the climate of tolerance requested by the Council of Europe. 1/

Note

1/ Minority languages with "limited" or "no capability of survival" are: Belgium: German (Montzen); Germany: Low Frisian, Sater Frisian (Oldenburg); France: Basque, Breton, Corsican, Dutch (West Flanders), Occitan (Provencal); Greece: Slavo Macedonian; United Kingdom: Irish (Northern Ireland), Cornish (Cornwall); Italy: Albanian, Greek (Apulia and Calabria), Catalan (Sardinia), Croat (Molise), Occitan (Piemont), Sardinian; Portugal: Mirandisch; Spain: Portuguese. "Endangered" minority languages are: Denmark: German (Northern Schleswig); Germany: Danish (Southern Schleswig), Sorb (Lausitz); Greece: Turkish (West Thrace); United Kingdom: Gaelic (Scotland); Ireland: Irish; Netherlands: Frisian (Friesland); Italy: French (Aosta), Friulian and Slovenic (Friaul); Spain: Basque (Navarra province) and Catalan (Aragon).